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TAGS: [KTIA](#) [MOPS](#) [EWWT](#) [XH](#) [ZJ](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: MONTREUX CONVENTION: MILITARY LIMITS ON THE
TURKISH STRAITS

REF: A. ANKARA 1958
[1](#)B. STATE 79658

Classified By: Political Military Counselor Timothy A. Betts for reason
s 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Montreux Convention (MC) obligates Turkey to keep the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus open to commercial shipping and to limit naval passage into and out of the Black Sea. In addition, non-littoral navies face limits on both tonnage and duration of stay in the Black Sea. Civilian owned but military commanded vessels are subject to these restrictions as well. Although the MC limits Turkey's ability to control fast-growing commercial traffic through the Straits and the environmental hazards this entails for the 17 million residents of Istanbul, the historical importance of the MC to Turkey, Turkish fears of relinquishing a share of control over the Straits, and Ankara's desire to maintain naval leadership in the Black Sea mean Turkey will not support an effort to renegotiate the Convention. Despite the restrictions, US Navy vessels can and do pass through the Straits and call on Black Sea ports. Transparency and inclusion of Turkey in US activities in the region should build Turkish support for USN, and eve NATO's, engagement in the Black Sea. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The 1936 Montreux Convention transferred to Turkey control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus that the International Commission had exercised since its creation in 1923 by an agreement negotiated in conjunction with the Treaty of Lausanne. This, in effect, restored Turkish sovereignty over the Straits and completed the creation of modern Turkey. The importance of the MC and the Treaty of Lausanne as founding documents of the Republic is taught in Turkish elementary schools. It was not signed by the US, but by the UK, Australia, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, the USSR and Turkey.

[1](#)3. (U) The MC enshrines the principle of freedom of transit through the straits for commercial shipping, limited only for

reasons of safety of navigation and public health. Over the past decade, Turkey has successfully imposed safety-based limits on passage of large tankers, but in so doing faced strong opposition and criticism from Russia. The risks presented by tankers are multiplied by an explosion in the number of unregulated smaller vessels in the Straits, which present risks to other shipping (including large tankers) as well as to residents on shore. As Black Sea and Central Asian oil and gas exports grow, the GOT would like to impose further limitations on traffic through the Straits in favor of "bypass" pipelines, but its legal ability to do so under the MC is ambiguous. Naval vessels, however, are subject to several explicit restrictions regarding passage through the Straits and presence in the Black Sea:

TRANSIT

- All naval vessels must be notified to the GOT in advance (at least eight days in advance for littoral powers; 15 days for non-littorals who must also specify destination and the date of their planned return passage);
- All naval vessels must transit the straits during daylight hours;
- Non-littoral countries' submarines may not transit; and,
- An individual nation's daily passage of "war ships" (including auxiliaries except oilers) may not exceed the lesser of 15,000 tons or nine vessels, although littoral states' ships of greater than 15,000 tons may pass with a two-destroyer escort.

PRESENCE IN THE BLACK SEA

- The total tonnage of non-littoral naval vessels (except oilers) in the Black Sea at any one time is 45,000 tons;
- The total tonnage that any one non-littoral navy may have in the Black Sea at one time is 30,000 tons; and,
- Non-littoral naval vessels may remain in the Black Sea no longer than 21 days and must then transit south through the Dardanelles.

None of the restrictions apply to foreign naval vessels visiting ports in the Straits (e.g., Istanbul) provided they leave the way they came, thereby avoiding a complete passage through the Straits.

14. (C) The MC obliges Turkey to enforce these limits. During the Cold War, the restrictions prevented the Soviet Navy from surging into the Mediterranean. However, they also impact the US Navy's operations. In June, for the USS Apache to complete its planned mission of over 21 days, it will need to exit the Black Sea, passing through the Dardanelles and then go through the Straits again. Similarly, another USN ship recently had its passage through the Straits delayed because its presence in the Black Sea would have exceeded the 45,000 ton aggregate limit on non-littoral naval vessels; it passed several days later after a German naval vessel exited the Black Sea. MFA officials are transparent with us when these situations arise, and offer workarounds or alternatives within the limit of the Convention. However, the MC requires that Turkey notify the other signatories of the movement of non-littoral navies through the Straits and into the Black Sea. If it appears that Turkey is breaking the rules, it would have to answer to the other signatories; Russia in particular uses these notifications to monitor USN traffic.

15. (C) Over the past several months we have explored informally with MFA whether there is flexibility in the application of these limits, particularly concerning civilian owned vessels chartered to the USN. This month we were told

that GOT legal experts view long-term leased ships under the command of the Maritime Sealift Command as auxiliaries under the MC and, therefore, subject to restrictions. However, short-term, time-chartered vessels not normally employed on fleet duties, hired to move military cargo are not considered auxiliaries and are therefore not subject to the tonnage and duration of stay restrictions of the MC, even when military personnel are on board provided they have no formal authority over the ship's master. This interpretation was how military hardware could be shipped through the Straits from Romania to Iraq prior to the Iraq War. Pointing to this precedent, an MFA official told us that he was confident a ship hired to carry humanitarian relief equipment and supplies next year as part of EUCOM's SEA BREEZE 07 exercise would normally be approved.

¶6. (C) The Turkish military's extreme sense of sovereignty and profession pride forbids foreign forces from exercising visible force protection measures, according to our MFA contact. This combination of pride and nationalism manifested itself during a March visit to Marmaris of the USS Theodore Roosevelt. When the TR wanted to fly a helicopter as it was coming into port as a force protection measure, the Turkish General Staff balked; flying it for other purposes was less of a problem. Similarly, although the cargo ships carrying war materiel for the Iraq War carried US armed forces personnel assigned to protect the cargo, they were kept out of sight during the passage through the Straits at the GOT's request. Future passages of like vessels would

have to do the same. MFA tells us, however, a request for Turkish military or coast guard escorts for the passage would be granted.

¶7. (C) Comment: Although the restrictions on non-littoral naval passage through the Turkish Straits and presence in the Black Sea constrain possible USN operations in the region, the importance of the MC to Turks' definition of their country predisposes Ankara to oppose any revision. Besides the emotional reaction and the arguments for changes in the Convention that would permit greater regulation of commercial traffic, the GOT would fear Russia and/or others would try to exert more control over management of the waterway or dilute Turkey's authority to regulate traffic. We defer to Embassy Moscow, but imagine Russia would welcome an opportunity to wrestle some control over the Straits from our NATO Ally.

¶8. (C) Comment (cont.): Turkish defense and enforcement of the Montreux Convention should not be mistaken as GOT opposition to US engagement in the Black Sea region. Turkey has welcomed US and NATO involvement in the littorals, strongly backing PFP participation and the membership of Romania and Bulgaria. Turkey's concerns about the Black Sea are narrowly focused on naval activities. Turkey sees itself as the naval leader in the region and believes NATO operations in the Black Sea might provoke the Russians to withdraw from Black Sea maritime security cooperation. It therefore takes a cautious view on NATO (and US) naval activities in the region. After discussions here in April (ref a) and between Turkish Navy and the Pentagon earlier that previewed ref b points on the Black Sea, Ankara now appears less concerned by USN and even limited NATO naval engagement there, as evidenced by completing TUN-USN exercises in the eastern Black Sea earlier this year, accepting the visit of the USS Porter to the Black Sea port of Samsun last month, and scheduling Turkish Navy participation in the Romania-hosted NATO exercise BREEZE next month. Remaining transparent and including Turkey where appropriate in our Black Sea activities should further put Ankara at ease and build Turkish support for our own engagement in the region. End comment.

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